

Intelligent Designers: Condo Developing

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WHEN VENESSA MENDENHALL, 28, was looking for a condo in the **District**, location and price were her two driving factors. The consultant for nonprofits wanted to be in **Adams Morgan** or **Dupont Circle**, but she soon found she didn't have a lot to choose from there when it came to new construction.

Then, she discovered her eventual home in the **West Olmstead Condominiums** at **Harvard** and **18th** streets **NW**, in a turn-of-the-20th-century brownstone that had recently been converted into five condos.

By snagging one of those units last **December**, Mendenhall got historic charm along with the modern design elements most condo buyers are looking for these days. Her appliances? Stainless steel, of course. Counters? **Zodiaq** quartz. And the floors? A light pine hardwood.

A wealth of storage space was also a big selling point for Mendenhall. Because the brownstone is built into a hill, Mendenhall has stairs that lead from her entry down to her one-bedroom condo. Under those stairs, the developer smartly incorporated a long walk-in closet and other storage space. "It's a small



unit, but the layout is good," says Mendenhall. "And they were really creative about using every nook and cranny."

Mendenhall isn't alone in appreciating high style and smart design. Condo developers know that, besides a good location and a good price, many buyers like her want the biggest decor bang for their buck, especially in the current marketplace.

"Right now, price is definitely king, and developers really have to be competitive on price point, or it's difficult for them," says **Ken Johnson**, CEO of DCRealEstate.com, which handles marketing and sales for a number of condo projects in the area. "But if condo developers put enough design into it, I think strong elements can overcome pricing. But they really need to focus on something innovative and fresh, something that's going to make people feel sexy about their homes. That's why the biggest trend we're seeing now is pure design."

Gone are the days when condos were divided into individual rooms with distinct purposes. Who needs a dining room if dinner usually means takeout in front of the **TiVo**? How can you throw killer parties if your living room is completely cut off from your kitchen? Buyers want to decide how they occupy their space, so open or loft-style floor plans have become almost the norm in new condo construction.

"People like options," says **Michelle Giannini**, senior vice president of sales and marketing at PN Hoffman, a D.C.-based developer whose current projects include the **Warehouses at Union Row** and the **Alta at Thomas Circle**. "They like the idea of being flexible with their floor plans and using their environment the way they want."

That was the case for **Leigh** and **Tom Mayrhofer**, who moved into a condo at the **Ventana** development in **Penn Quarter** in **2006**. "I didn't want to live in a dark place with lots of small rooms," says Leigh Mayrhofer, a 33-year-old assistant principal at a public school. "I wanted an open feeling to the main living space, yet I also wanted bedrooms that could be closed off for privacy."

Elements like moveable walls, freestanding kitchen islands and outdoor terraces or balconies further increase flexibility and add to overall living space. "We've even seen drawers built into loft spaces, making sure that no space is wasted," says Johnson.

When it comes to kitchens, stainless-steel appliances and granite countertops used to be something of a luxury, upscale touches meant to wow prospective buyers. Now, they're something of a given. "Granite and stainless are pretty common, I have to say," says **Niki K. Piersall**, vice president of McWilliams/Ballard, a local sales and marketing firm that specializes in multi-family housing. "You find it a lot nowadays. It used to be more of a novelty, but now it's pretty commonplace."

That doesn't mean that buyers have soured on the materials, or that developers have stopped using them. But it does mean that the search is on for the next big things, and for surfaces and features that are both pretty and planet-friendly. So, expect to see more counters made from **Silestone**, **CaesarStone** (natural quartz products), concrete, stainless steel and even recycled glass or plastic.

In new construction, most appliances boast the **Energy Star** rating (indicating their energy efficiency), and, like furniture, aim to maximize space. Cabinetry with **European**-style flat fronts has come into fashion, done in either a traditional wood grain or a bright-colored lacquer. In some cases, developers or homeowners are installing panels on appliances to match the cabinets or to give them a more custom appearance.

"I was at a home and design center not too long ago, and I saw refrigerator panels that were sort of an antique bronze; it was a really great look," says Piersall. "We're seeing a lot of copper coming into play, so I think people are really starting to experiment with color, hence the lacquer finishes on cabinet doors and that kind of thing. I think color is really going to start to come back."

Wall-to-wall carpeting remains something of a no-no, at least in a condo's main living spaces. There, wood or tile flooring ranks high on buyers' wish lists. The **Mayrhofers** even chose to have hardwood floors throughout their condo, rather than stick with the carpeting that originally came standard on the stairs and second floor.



PN Hoffman uses **Spanish** porcelain tiles in some of its spaces, while Bogdan Builders, the developers of condo properties like **Logan Station** and **Belmont Vista**, tends to opt for hardwood floors. "I'm seeing a lot of condo units going to dark finished floors; that seems to be the current trend now," says **Steve Gerber**, vice president of production for Bogdan Builders. "And that's not necessarily a dark walnut or mahogany wood material, but the actual floor is stained or darkened."

In bathrooms, glass plays a major role, whether it's in frameless shower doors or tiles used for everything from accents to walls to shower surrounds. Glass also takes center stage in many condo building facades as both a design element and a way to allow as much natural light into units as possible.

That kind of respect for the outside world also shows up in the many "green" elements in condo construction these days, whether it's low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) paint on the walls, energy-efficient cooling and heating systems, or green roofs. PN Hoffman's Alta at Thomas Circle project was the first new residential building in D.C. to be **LEED**-certified by the **U.S. Green Building Council**, a certification indicating high-performance sustainability that other properties are striving for as well.

"Buyers are looking for green properties and, in some cases, they're willing to pay a little more either in terms of the cost or in fees if they feel like they're doing something good for the **Earth**," says **Elizabeth Blakeslee**, **National Association of Realtors Region III** vice president. "Not every buyer, but definitely some."

"Green construction is becoming more common, with more developers going toward LEED certification," says Johnson. "There are a couple of projects in D.C. shooting for that, but it's still only a handful. Office buildings leapt ahead [when it came to LEED certification]. Condos haven't caught up, but I think they will, and it will become something that's just expected. But if they're going to be green, they have to be practical for purchasers and stylish, too."

Style and convenience also rate high when it comes to condo amenities and common areas. Residential lounges in PN Hoffman properties include kitchen areas, flat-screen TVs, fireplaces, and Wi-Fi hot spots. Many Bogdan Builders properties feature video entry phones and closed-circuit cameras for increased security.

"We're seeing enhanced services in condo buildings, which are sort of borrowing from boutique hotels and focusing on concierge-level services," says Piersall. "And those services could range from getting restaurant reservations to planning vacations and everything in between."

What Piersall hasn't been seeing a lot of recently? Corian countertops, top-mount sinks and brass fixtures. "But as with everything, these trends are sort of cyclical," she says. "So, what's old can be new again." In that case, don't be too quick to get rid of those old brass fixtures. Stash them under your bed instead, in case they're all the rage again in five or 10 years.

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